

Table of Contents

Divided City II 1

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By Anthony Iles

Divided City

Divided City organised by the London Social Forum was a large event organised at Limehouse Town Hall, (full programme) since I live on Commercial Road and I am directly subject to the negative effects of the 'affluence-driven development' under sway in London that the conference intended to tackle, the event was in several ways 'right up my street'.

This follows on the report by Keith Perkins posted here and is a quick breakdown of some of what I picked up from the talks I heard and workshops I attended accompanied by some subjective observations of what this experience meant to me at the present time.

The literature promoting the Divided Cities event covered the overwhelmingly uneven forms of looting and displacement that passes for 'development' connecting, very well, the motivating myths of London's speculators - 'global city', 'diverse city' etc. - to the detrimental effects that the practices of these myth-peddlers give lie. '... precarious economic circumstance and financial indebtedness, and the social marginalisation of low-income persons and enterprises.'

So, while I will acquiesce to a certain extent to the analysis advanced in the literature promoting the event, I have a few things to say about how the theoretical contestation of the current state of 'development might connect better to effective forms practical contestation. The critique of the neo-liberalisation of the city is right, but just being right does not necessarily advance us very far.

It was reassuring that at the event itself we were not greeted by yet another disinterested panel of experts holding forth on the troubles of this world, but rather people, unusual in London, who have already moved beyond the fact of being right about the general state of affairs and now find themselves in that more disorienting predicament of trying to struggle against it. Some, because they hold onto the 'angelic'[1] illusion that 'another world is possible', others because they are faced with the reality that their 'world is impossible' or 'no longer possible' and are begrudgingly forced to take action.

I have to draw attention to the fact that division as ever is amongst 'us' here and I will list some of the problems I think should be put to the fore to overcome this.

I missed the initial talks, so I'll concentrate in this report on some of the highlights and specifically the workshop around the effects of the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Earlier Martin Slavin had given an extremely useful introduction to the widespread negative effects of the Olympic games. Martin is informed by both the specific role of London in the global financial markets and the recent history of opposition to the games in many cities. He was kind enough to recommend two books H.J. Lenskys 'Inside the Olympic Games and M. Roche 'Mega-Events' which both plot the history of the Olympics and other 'global events' alongside the forms of resistance that have responded to their negative effects. His own research on the impact on housing of the London Olympics can be found here <http://www.hic-net.org/articles.asp?PID=543>

Joe James, International Gypsy & Traveller Affairs, spoke of the three gypsy and traveller sites that are slated to be cleared. Waterden Crescent in Hackney, Clays Lane in Newham because of the Olympic Project and Eleanor Street in Tower Hamlets because of the Crossrail project. He also spoke of his experience at Dales Farm, one of the oldest and largest traveller's sites in Europe. Despite

having purchased the land some time ago the occupants of the site are under significant pressure to move since the land (formerly a scrap-yard) has been re-classified as green-belt land. Whilst even if eviction orders are served the estimated costs of eviction (2 million pounds) are likely to discourage Basildon council from taking action, the residents of the site are under tremendous pressure as the council withdraws services and local police have designated the site a 'no-go' zone. see http://www.advocacy.net.org/cpage_view/GypsiesUK_gypsies_60_375.html

Clays lane is both a unique housing cooperative, set up in the 1980s to provide housing (450 homes) for young inhabitants of East London and also contains a gypsy and traveller's site. The housing cooperative and traveller's site are both subject to a compulsory purchase order issued by the London Development Agency. Clays Lane : <http://www.irwinmitchell.com/PressOffice/PressReleases/Public+enquiry+as+housing+development+under+threat+as+games+come+to+town.htm>

These are both examples of how the basic need for housing is dismissed in the face of large-scale regeneration schemes, whether the land is to be re-used for housing or green spaces the existing inhabitants have to go!! New homeowners who are in many ways New Labour's shock troops in the ongoing gentrification of London would prefer to live next to an empty park than a thriving community of 'undesirables'.

This emptying out and 'greening' of the Lea Valley applies to two other groups who are currently contesting the Olympic plan. The numerous local groups who will lose their playing grounds and facilities on Hackney marshes as a result of the games and Manor Gardens Allotments, Hackney whose users have already gained significant media coverage of their plight (the loss of this source of picturesque food diversity being a cause celebre for Guardian-readers) - the allotments are to be scrapped and the area landscaped to make a reed marsh for ducks.

Whilst the discussion around the Olympics had the effect of limiting the wider discussions planned of land rights and occupations in a rural context (Simon Fairlie, *The Land is Ours/Chapter-7*) or other campaigns such as Broadway and Queen Street Markets not being directly tied to the Olympics, there seemed to be a highly productive sense of urgency around contesting the 'London plan', with several speakers highlighting the LDA consultation meeting next year (exact date??) as a target for organising around and directing actions towards. There was also encouragement to further catenate the wider range of housing, services, environmental campaigns opposed to the Olympic plan.

Another outcome of the meeting was the announcement of a gamesmonitor list : <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/gamesmonitor/> The list has already drawn a number of participants of the meeting and will hopefully be joined by a number of groups not present at the meeting.

Panels later in the day presented projects that used mapping to give a picture of both local and global land seizures, forced evictions etc. The Habitat International Coalition's violation database is one such project <http://www.hic-net.org/>. City Mine(d) is a platform for networking and mapping diverse organisations contesting urban space and making interventions in the neo-liberal city <http://www.citymined.org/>. INURA, www.inura.org is an equally international network focussing on specialised research and actions against attacks on democracy and non-marketised forms of life. Somehow these projects didn't carry the same urgency for me of the earlier workshops, but I'm sure they provide useful resources that could be tapped into to support the struggles discussed earlier.

Whilst on an optimistic note this is the first time I have seen a London-wide (and beyond) coalition of interests forming around a multi-faceted campaign and I am hopeful that this will grow. There are many pitfalls and problems facing the social forum and the possibilities of organising around and against the London Olympics.

The most obvious problem confronting the Social Forum, highlighted by the setting of this meeting is the actual social composition of the meeting:

There were no Bangladeshi groups present, despite the meeting being held in a borough that has the highest proportion of Bangladeshi inhabitants. Despite there being several campaigns (Crossrail was notably mentioned but not dealt with in detail see comments on Indymedia post of Keith's report <http://www0.indymedia.org.uk/en/2006/10/352437.html>) with a great deal of local support as well as Bangladeshi youth, workers and migrants support organisations based in the borough. It is obvious to anyone living in the borough that the moniker 'divided city' applies only more and more to this eastern citadel extending from the city's borders. Rather than a 'lack' of 'ethnic diversity' I see this and experience it daily as fundamentally a class divide clothed in racial and cultural difference.

There were few black groups or individuals present. I had a very brief exchange with one individual for whom this was a problem, one that not only hampered their own participation, but also made them question the validity of any meaningful collective action emerging from the meeting.

I also didn't hear any Polish, Ukranian, Russian, Estonian or Lithuanian voices speaking here, strange as usually I hear them everyday living and working in this borough.

I would point to the multidimensional levels upon which this city is divided across ethnic, class and age lines. It is pointless asking 'how can we represent these groups better'? These are questions the government and local authorities ask and develop coercive policies to achieve. The point is not to represent but to invite people to get involved and actively engage with their campaigns and interests, inform and encourage people to take over the process that is determining their lives.

My past impressions is that the Social Fora are often made up of older white activists, this meeting was different and I was encouraged to see younger activists, a wide range of experience and some with a specifically working class focus to their activity.

There was some tension, re-iterated several times between the local (London) and regional (elsewhere, rural etc). Whilst this was not a barrier to communication, I expect this tension could throw up problems in the future. In terms of the workshop about the effects of the London Olympics, many people came to find out what this had to do with them - as far as I can see you can get an accurate picture of the extent of regeneration schemes from surfing through some of the sites below (and checking the websites and literature of the bodies charged with organising the games LDA / ODA). However, and this is a crucial point that I will return to again and again - the movement of labour that will be employed to do the massive work of transformation of the Lea Valley and surrounding area which may be a mixture of both prison (i.e. forced) and migrant labour will have both far-reaching and invisible (if we close our eyes) effects.

So, looking at this last point from a wider perspective, the Social Forum in general and the discussions held last Sunday need to deal with a specific issue - there have been campaigns supported by the London Social Forum against the racist border regime enforced in this country, nonetheless when the issue of migrant labour being employed for the Olympics, there were sighs as if this amounted to work being taken away from 'Londoners'. Not only are these two positions contradictory, they are also counter-productive and betray an adherence to existing racisms circulated by the mainstream media, fascist politicians etc etc. Unless this issue is confronted and some positions developed this is going to hamper any action by this group. I don't think anybody present was themselves directly going to be deprived of work as a result of the Olympics, so maybe it is more important to listen to someone who is. At the same time, if alliances are not made with those who may be working on the Olympic sites and associated regeneration schemes, or being made unemployed as a result of them, major points of confrontation and contestation will be missed.

Another important step will be de-legitimising the new neoliberal institutions LDA, ODP, ODA etc that are steering much of this development all over the country. Many of them don't have such a good public face as it is (e.g. the LDA) and being PR obsessed they are very easy to discredit and embarrass. Though I missed the talk earlier in the day (Fred Harrison, Land Research Trust) about London's property bubble I welcome further meditation upon this inflationary mechanism as a driver for the intensification of social inequalities in London and elsewhere. There was discussion later in the day about introducing new forms of land tax, personally I am sceptical about efforts to simply regulate a phenomenon that is lucrative as long as it is unstable and concentrates risk in the hands of the many and wealth in the hands of a few. I would personally eat my hat if the Treasury sought to regulate one of the few drivers of the economy it can currently control with change of interest rates. A better understanding of the property bubble will help us understand better how to deflate it and in turn how to delink the processes by which it intensifies our exploitation at work and at home.

On the whole I found the day very cathartic, its nice to meet other people who are being shafted by the regeneration/gentrification bogey-man. The circulation of struggles going on in parts of London I am not in touch with is particularly useful. Joe's account of the battle over gypsy's and traveller's sites was particularly interesting and shows that the phenomenon of the Olympics is as much part of a social cleansing zeitgeist affecting the whole of London. I was also pleased to see some energy put into efforts to connect-up these campaigns and struggles. This is important work and I look forward to seeing it intensify in the coming months.

Anthony Iles

[1] See Midnight Notes Introduction to 'New Enclosures'